

Thinking theologically about youth ministry

Starting Right

**Kenda Creasy Dean
Chap Clark
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Starting Right: Thinking theologically about youth ministry

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To all those who helped us start right...

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—*K. C. D., C. C., D. R.*

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—*K. C. D.*

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—*C. C.*

Thanks to the graduate students of Huntington College who help me think theologically all the time and to the youth ministers with whom I have the privilege of serving week in and week out. You help me practice what I think.

—*D. R.*

Intro

Theological Rocks—First Things First

Kenda Creasy Dean

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.

—*Matthew 7:24-26*

Most of us have known our share of “beach ministries”—ministries with young people whose foundations are firmly anchored in...sand. Gangbusters one day, gone the next, these ministries just couldn’t weather storms of conflict or the wet blankets of indifference. They couldn’t keep up with the flood of overwhelming need, or withstand the winds of pastoral change. One day they just fell with a great crash. Or, more likely, the youth minister in charge did.

Storms, wet blankets, floods, and wind are part of ministry. Fortunately, so are sunny days, clear sinuses, and quiet, warm eddies that keep life interesting. The difference between those who thrive in youth ministry and those who collapse under its weight lies in the substance of our foundations: have we built ministry on theological bedrock, or on the shifting sand of cultural relevance? Don’t get me wrong: Jesus didn’t tell the parable about the wise and foolish builders to condemn the sand—and nor should the church condemn efforts to relate to culture. But beach trips and attunement to cultural change take place on the *surface* of ministry, not at its heart. The problem in this parable isn’t the sand, but the *builder*: somebody who should have known better chose to forego the hard work of laying a solid foundation for the sake of quick construction, a spectacular view, and bargain prices.

You’ve probably heard the story, repackaged recently by management guru Stephen Covey, about the professor who one day filled an aquarium with large rocks. “Is it full?” he asked his students. Most of them nodded yes. Then he took gravel and poured it into the aquarium, letting it spill between the rocks. “Now is it full?” More cautiously, most students said yes, it was full. Then the professor poured sand into the aquarium, filling in the gaps and crevices left by the gravel. “*Now* is it full?” he asked the class. The students squirmed—but anyone could see that the aquarium was practi-

What are your theological rocks?

Which of your beliefs about God matter the most to you? Which ones would you say are “musts” for youth ministry? Do you have a theological conviction that serves as the hub of your beliefs and practices?

Think of an adolescent you know. If you could share only five things about God over the course of your ministry with this teenager, what would want him or her to hear you say?

Write your theological rocks here:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

1. Thanks to Ron Foster for the loan of this exercise.

cally overflowing. Then the professor took a large pitcher of water, and carefully poured it into the sand. At last, the aquarium could hold no more.¹

I share this story with you for the same reason Stephen Covey tells it in management seminars: it's a simple illustration of *first things*. Had the professor filled the aquarium first with sand and water, the rocks—the aquarium's main substance, the “big stuff”—never would have fit. Trying to shove rocks in last would be futile (not to mention messy). Of course, that may not stop us from trying. Remember the middle high Sunday school lesson? After you checked in on the week's highs and lows, after you finished the jelly bean relay (which was more fun than expected, so it took twice as long as planned), after you told the pithy story that seemed to illustrate the day's Bible text—well, time ran out. Half the class left for choir, the other half dissolved in chaos, and (oops) the Bible lesson never quite got covered. “*Theological rocks*”: *first things first*. Or what about those disruptive eighth-grade girls at the camp you ran this summer? You knew they were begging for attention, so you meant to arrange some one-on-one time with them once the school year started. But then the school year started with a vengeance. Your workload went from zero to 60 overnight. The camp director wants your input for next summer—tomorrow. You're still preparing your Thursday small group when the doorbell rings with the first arrivals, every single time. And now there's a message on your answering machine from some youth ministry publisher reminding you about the free resources your church can have *if* you show up to Saturday's training event. Girls? Oh—those girls. “*Theological rocks*”: *first things first*.

Or maybe you remember a frantic phone call from a distraught mother whose son, a freshman at the local university, drank himself into alcohol poisoning at a fraternity party. You, another intern, and the pastor met them at the hospital. You brokered counseling sessions with the campus rehab center, contacted university support systems, prayed with both mother and son. In some ways, your crisis intervention skills had never been better. And yet it didn't occur to you to suggest to this helpless mother that *she* pray for her child's recovery. Nor did it cross your mind that she needed you to teach her how. “*Theological rocks*”: *first things first*.

These are real stories from my own ministry, drawn from days I filled with sand and water instead of with the theological “rocks” that brought me into ministry in the first place. I wish there weren't so many of those days to choose from. Youth ministers are forever filling sacred opportunities with competence, usefulness, busyness, enthusiasm—everything *but* intentional reflection on God and how our ministries do, and do not, bear out our convictions in our practice.² The irony is that church professionals usually have theological commitments to spare, and yet we are more apt to develop ministry, and maybe youth ministry especially, in response to a job description or the latest barrage of parental complaints than from careful theological reflection. We seldom take time to reflect on *why* we do what we do, or *whom* we do it for—that is, unless something has gone horribly and irrevocably wrong.

1. Stephen Covey, and others, *First Things First: To Live, to Love, to Learn, to Leave a Legacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 88–90.

2. Technically, of course, it is never our ministry, but God's ministry. However, the possessive pronoun is used in this book to indicate that God entrusts certain ministries to our care, and to that extent they are indeed “ours” because God has given them to us to faithfully execute.

Geology 101

The basic premise behind this textbook is this: *Practical theological reflection*—reflection that connects what we believe about God with how we live as disciples of Jesus Christ—is the *first* task of ministry with young people. By *first*, we do not mean that practical theological reflection on youth ministry necessarily precedes everything else. All decent theology begins and ends in practice, so sequence matters little in the ongoing cycle of practical theological reflection. Such reflection comes “first” in the sense that it is primary, fundamental—basic to everything else we do and to who God calls us to be. To fail to think theologically about youth ministry, as Eugene Peterson has pointedly noted, is to risk substituting a religious career for a holy vocation.³ To fail to name our theological priorities in ministry—our “theological rocks,” if you will—tempts both vocational infidelity and professional impotence.

Those of us preparing for ministry with young people must do more than pack a pastoral bag of tricks (at worst) or ready ourselves with models, strategies, and theories relevant to young people and the world in which they live (at best). *First* we must identify our “theological rocks,” the convictions about who God is and what God is about that are normative for everything we do. These are the convictions that call us to faith and that govern our ministries. Whether we realize it or not, our theological rocks affect how we develop an evening youth program, approach a sermon, handle conflict, engage parents, plan a retreat, counsel teenagers, relate to our own families. *Practical theology* is concerned with Christian action, with the way we *enact* faith in the life of discipleship and ministry in the church and in the world. Sometimes, when we begin to recognize the deep connections between our theological convictions and the way we do ministry, we change our actions. Sometimes we change our convictions instead. In either case, we engage in practical theological reflection in order to discover more faithful ways of *doing* faith.

If, upon reading this book, you begin to see threads between the way you think about God and the way you practice youth ministry, then our mission will be accomplished. Hopefully, you will also lay claim to some of your theological rocks along the way. Theological rocks may be sandstone or granite; some remain constant throughout our lives, others are smoothed by circumstance, personality, education, the Christian tradition in which we worship, our personal experience, and knowledge of God, to name a few possible streams of influence. Since youth ministers must become skilled *backdoor theologians*—people who can slip theological truth in through the cracks of everyday life, without waiting for a formal invitation to preach⁴—the *first* task of ministry must discern those theological rocks we want our lives and our ministries to proclaim. Five minutes with a teenager is a lifetime. Given such a holy window, what above all else would you want that young person to know about God?

Your timing is good

The early 21ST century is an encouraging time to enter youth ministry. Approxi-

3. For a provocative treatment of this thesis, see Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 1987.

4. I am indebted to Ron Foster for this concept, who explains the importance of backdoor theology and theological rocks for youth ministry in our book, *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul-Tending in Youth Ministry* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1998), 180–181.

| Year | Youth Population | Percentage of Total Global Population |
|------|------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1985 | 0.94 billion | 19.40% |
| 1995 | 1.03 billion | 17.80% |
| 2025 | 1.36 billion | 16% |

Youth population table (1985-2025)

1. Eighty-five percent of these youth live in developing countries, and this number is expected to rise to 89 percent by 2020. The United Nations defines “youth” as anyone between the ages of 15 and 24. All statistics taken from the United Nations Division for Social Policy and Development (January 6, 1999), www.un.org/esa/socdev/yinyin/q-and-a/htm.

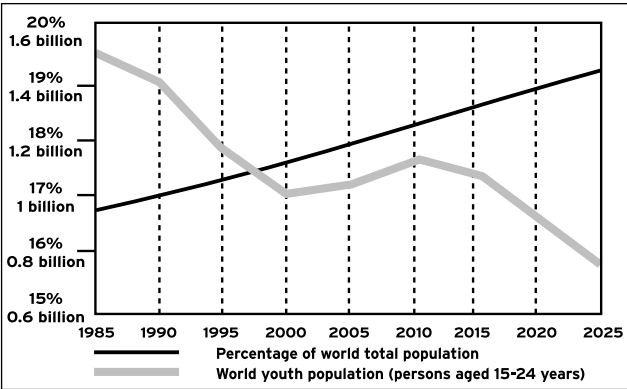
mately one person in five is between the ages of 15 and 24 years, or 18 percent of the world’s population. Although the percentage of young people will decline in the early 21st century, in real numbers this represents an increase in the number of youth in the world (see chart).

According to one estimate, the U.S. teen population will rise in the next decade from 29 million to 36 million. “In other words,” observed *Rolling Stone* recently, “resistance is futile. Teenagers are driving our culture—and they won’t be giving the keys back anytime soon.”⁵

Your ministry is taking root while the tectonic plates of intellectual and cultural change are still shifting, altering not only *what* people think, but *how* thinking actually happens. Discoveries like quantum physics and the arrival of the information age have sealed the tomb on modernity and toppled the reign of linear reason. Chaos theory demonstrates that science can defy prediction, hermeneutics reveals that there is no such thing as “objective” inquiry. Hyperlinks are teaching us to think in terms of connections, not closure, and the Internet smashes through old paradigms, creating relationships between both people and data that we once thought impossible.

Our culture’s current interest in spirituality is the predictable consequence of these shifts—changes that have led to a period in which we find some of our most basic cultural assumptions on shifting sand. The intellectual atmosphere of the early 21st century invites comparisons to the climate that gave rise to the Protestant Reformation, the Great Awakening, and even the Pentecostal revivals of the early 20th century. Historians have long noted a relationship between cultural upheaval and religious revival, as times of uncertainty cause humans to turn to religion to reconstruct the cultural narrative.⁶

Perhaps, then, we should not be surprised that “God” is experiencing a popular comeback. Teenagers meet at school flagpoles for prayer, corporate executives attend seminars on spirituality, and religion is discussed openly in chat rooms and lunchrooms alike. When pollster George Gallup asked the question, “Have you had occasion to talk about your religious faith in the workplace in the past 24 hours?,” 48 percent of Americans said yes.⁷ MTV, VH-1, MP3, and prime time all fearlessly invoke religious imagery. Even public policy has cleared the way for religious institutions to proclaim their faith while addressing social concerns from school reform to gang violence.⁸ For the first



World youth population estimates: total and percentage (1985-2025)

5. “Britney Spears: Inside the Heart, Mind, and Bedroom of a Teen Dream,” *Rolling Stone* (April 15, 1999), 131.

6. Thanks to church historian Douglas Strong of Wesley Theological Seminary for pointing me to this thesis. See William McLaughlin, *Revivalism, Awakenings, and Reform* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press), 1978 and Richard Riss, *A Survey of 20th Century Revival Movements in North America* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson), 1988.

7. Michelle Conlin, “Religion in the Workplace: The Growing Presence of Spirituality in Corporate America,” *Business Week* (November 1, 1999), 152.

8. Foremost among those public policies to take religious formation seriously is controversial political scientist John Dilulio, who describes himself as a “born-again Catholic” and who cites social science research correlating religious faith and reduced antisocial behavior in urban adolescents. See Tim Stafford, “The Criminologist Who Discovered Churches,” *Christianity Today* (June 14, 1999), 35–39.

The global village of youth

If the world's youth population in 1995 consisted of a village of 100 people, here is what it would look like:

- There would be 51 young men and 49 young women;
- 49 of these youthful villagers would live in the village center, 51 of them in the rural outskirts;
- There would be 60 young Asians, 15 Africans, nine Latin Americans and Caribbeans, and only 16 young people from the industrialized countries of the world;
- 15 of the villagers would be illiterate; nine of these 15 illiterate villagers would be young women.
- 61 of the young villagers would be working or looking for work;
- 64 would be living off an average income of less than U.S. \$1,000 per year, and only 11 would be earning an average income of more than \$10,000;
- By the end of the year, one young person would have contracted the HIV virus.¹

1. United Nations Division for Social Policy and Development (January 6, 1999), www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/q-and-a/village.htm.

time since 1986, church attendance among teenagers in North America is on the rise—and surpasses adult church attendance—and more teenagers today say they attend church, not because their parents tell them to, but because “they want to.” God is clearly “hot.”

Could there be a more exciting time to enter ministry, especially ministry with young people? But wait: first things first. After all, in this philosophically unstable but spiritually fertile environment, martyrdom has also reentered the adolescent vocabulary. Nobody counted on a renewed interest in spirituality that included murder in the school library, or gunmen shooting teen worshipers in a Texas church sanctuary. Nobody counted on the fact that God calls youth ministers to pastor the Eric Harris and Dylan Klebolds of our communities, as well as the Cassie Bernalls, Rachel Scotts, and Valeen Schnurrs. Nobody counted on the fact that, despite our high-tech, virtual reality expectations, Christianity always traffics in *visceral* reality, turning the tables—in the Temple and elsewhere—in ways we seldom anticipate. Nobody counted on the stakes of youth ministry being quite this high. But that's exactly how high they are.

And so: first things first.

Youth ministry and practical theology

Until very recently, practical theology has been altogether absent from the youth ministry equation. Youth ministry has often been conceived as a junior partner in the Christian education enterprise rather than as a pastoral calling. Clearly, Christian education is one component of our mission with young people—but it is not the only component, nor is it the primary one. Approaching youth ministry from the perspective of practical theology assumes that youth are called to take part in every practice of Christian ministry, to participate in the total mission of the church, for God calls all of us into the divine plan of salvation.

While adolescents' unparalleled spiritual openness requires intentional ministries on their behalf, youth are practical theologians by virtue of calling, not proficiency. Like you and me, youth must grapple with what it means to be a child of God on a planet marred by sin and redeemed by love. They must reflect on the activities of Christian life in order to construct a faithful one they may call their own. They must listen for and respond to God's call to them to become ministers in their own right. Their vocation is no different than our own. They simply plough different fields, with (perhaps) less practice and experience.

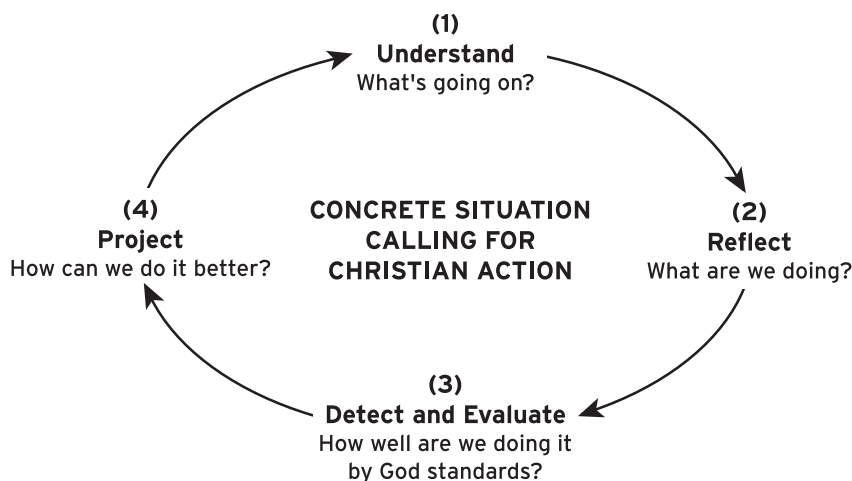
This book locates youth ministry squarely within the broader theological enterprise called practical theology, or theological reflection on Christian action. Because Christian action unapologetically invites God to use us to transform the world in Jesus' name, practical theology is intimately connected to the practices of ministry—which is not to say it is *limited* to the practices of professional church ministers. All Christians are called to be practical theologians, disciples whose obedience to God in the church and in the world puts our truth claims into practice. Theology that goes unnamed and

9. George H. Gallup, Jr., *The Spiritual Life of Young Americans: Approaching the Year 2000* (Princeton, New Jersey: George H. Gallup International Institute, 1999), 9–10; George Gallup, Jr., and D. Michael Lindsay, *Surveying the Religious Landscape* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Morehouse Publishing, 1999), 145.

unnoticed is powerless to change lives or ministries. Practical theology assumes that we live our convictions about who God is and how God works in the world, and that we practice our theology most faithfully when we do it on purpose.

How this book works

This book is organized as an example of practical theological reflection on youth ministry and is divided into four sections reminiscent of four tasks within practical theological reflection:¹⁰



The Tasks of Practical Theology

The first section of this book explores the nature of practical theology and its significance for youth ministry, and describes how theological reflection affects the way we understand our present context for ministry with young people. This task (Understand) asks, *How can we understand a concrete situation using the theological resources of Scripture, Christian tradition (church teachings or doctrine), human reason, and sacred experience?* So the first question practical theology poses for youth ministry is *How can we describe the concrete situation in which God is calling us to act as youth ministers?*

Sections 2, 3, and 4 focus on subsequent questions of practical theology. Section 2 (Reflect) asks: *What should the practice of youth ministry look like, given the concrete situa-*

10. I am borrowing heavily from the methodology for practical theological reflection proposed by Don S. Browning in *Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress), 1991. Browning offers what is arguably the most comprehensive method for practical theological reflection available in contemporary scholarship. I am sympathetic to his effort to locate all theological reflection within the context of practical theology, but this argument lies beyond the scope of the present text.

tion described above? In this book, different authors answer this question in different ways, but together they reflect the landscape of current approaches to youth ministry.

Section 3 (Detect and Evaluate) critically defends various practices of youth ministry according to certain theological rocks or norms held by the section's authors. These authors suggest that our practices of youth ministry should be guided by theological doctrines like repentance, grace, redemption, and hope. The third task in practical theology makes explicit use of theological rocks by asking *How do we critically defend what youth ministry should be like in the concrete situation we have described?*

The fourth task in the cycle might be called Project—reconstructing youth ministry to more faithfully and self-consciously communicate the God we know, lest we format God to fit our limited vision, or shrink salvation to the shape of our ministries. This final task of practical theological reflection for youth ministry asks *What means, strategies, and forms of persuasion should we use in this concrete situation with young people that best communicate the gospel?*¹¹

We have invited a number of different theological perspectives into the discussion in each section. We hope you will test these perspectives against your own, using the supplementary comments along the margins of these pages to help you practice thinking theologically about what you are reading. These marginalia are our editorial fingerprints, and like fingerprints, they give us away. You'll see my fingerprints in sections 1 and 3, Chap Clark's in section 2, and Dave Rahn's in section 4. Take us on. The marginalia are intended to muss up the theological hairs on your head, to provoke conversation and theological reflection, and—most importantly—to help you consider what your own theological foundation for youth ministry might look like. You may even stumble across some theological rocks along the way.

Who are youth?

As you explore this text, you will notice a number of terms for young people: *youth*, *adolescents*, *teenagers*, *students*. Although we will offer a more differentiated understanding of adolescence in chapter 2, for the most part you may consider these terms synonymous. Each of these terms has its own history, but casual usage over the past several decades has homogenized most of their differences.

Youth ministry for much of the 20TH century meant ministry with high school and, more recently, with junior high students. Today a *youth* may be any young person between the onset of puberty and fully individuated adulthood.¹² During this period in the life cycle, adolescents must acquire an *identity*, a coherent sense of self that hangs

11. I have adapted Browning's four basic questions of what he calls strategic practical theology—the form of practical theology most directly associated with Christian action. He places strategic practical theology within the larger enterprise of “fundamental practical theology” which has four movements: descriptive theology (describing present praxis in light of Christian faith), which is followed by historical theology (discerning normative texts and teachings that help provide a context for present praxis) and systematic theology (discerning encompassing themes in the gospel that speak to present praxis), and finally strategic practical theology (focusing on appropriate strategies for communicating the gospel in a concrete situation for ministry).

12. The term “individuation” will also receive more attention in Chapter 2, but it should not be confused with either “differentiation” (implying separateness from other human beings) or with “individualization” (a sociological term implying the priority of one's own perspective in approaching the world).

together over time and persists throughout multiple social roles.¹³ Arbitrary though these boundaries for adolescence may seem, they are really quite fluid. Adolescence in the United States today often begins during late childhood (ages nine or 10) and extends through the mid-20s or sometimes later (when the young person makes enduring commitments relative to vocation and intimacy). Youth ministry, therefore, properly addresses young people in any of these stages.

A word about language

One final observation before we begin. While we have used inclusive language to refer to women and men throughout this book, we have chosen to honor individual conscience in regard to language about God. The use of pronouns for God (male or female) are consciously chosen by each author, and you may assume that these choices reflect something about the author's theological tradition and personal beliefs that he or she wishes to convey. Their choices do not necessarily reflect the convictions of those of us in the editors' seats (all of whom, by the way, understand God to be both male and female and, at the same time, to transcend gender—although we each use language differently to express this belief). We hope the different voices represented in this volume will spur your own theological reflection, not only on inclusive language, but on all matters of ministry. We want you to wonder whether your own “God-talk” with young people grows out of your conviction about who God is, or whether it is a byproduct of unexamined assumptions that—until now—you might not have even known you had.

That said, our decision not to force conformity around the issue of inclusive language says something about our own theological convictions—namely, that youth ministry includes, but goes beyond, any single theological discussion or debate. Many of us who have grown up in the United States have learned to approach language with scalpel precision, and this cultural norm makes inclusive language about God an important matter for many people in our culture. Christians growing up in other cultures may just as properly privilege other theological discussions instead. None of us has the corner on divine identity; Christians of all theological flavors need one another in order to critique and embrace possibilities about God that might not occur to us, were we without each other's differences. Youth ministry is one place our kaleidoscope church comes together to focus on a common mission: Jesus' call to the church to love young people to him so they can hear Christ's call to ministries of their own. Theological politics aside, in the end there is always more in our faith to unite than divide us. After all, every Christian calls upon the name of Jesus, and we all do so for the sake of our young. In every Christian community, of every theological tradition, from every conceivable polity, with every possible liturgical form, at the end of the day people go

13. The concept of “identity formation” has evolved in the 50 years since it was first popularized by the work of Erik H. Erikson. However, its basic categories still inform the way scholars and youth workers talk about adolescence, although post-modern research will undoubtedly refine its meaning for the 21st century.

home—parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, neighbors, and friends—people go home and pray for their children.

In so doing, perhaps we pray for ourselves.

Kenda Creasy Dean

Princeton Theological Seminary

March 25, 2000

Feast of the Annunciation of the Theotokos

Section 1

The Tasks of Practical Theology:

Understanding the Concrete Situation

Chapter 1

Fessing Up:
Owning Our Theological Commitments

Chapter 2

The Changing Face of Adolescence:
A Theological View of Human Development

Chapter 3

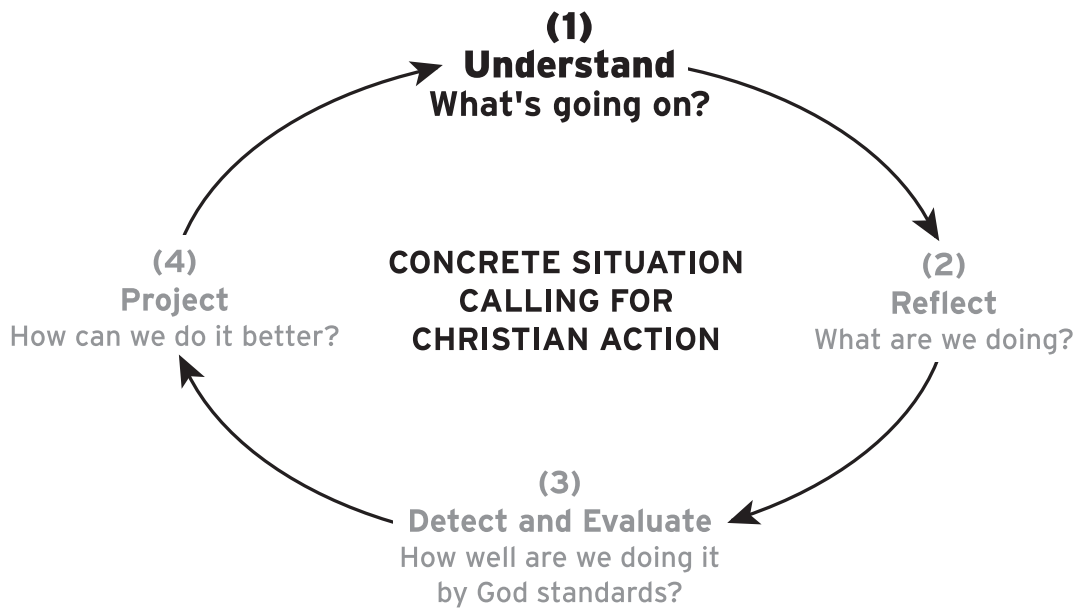
Growing Up Postmodern:
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Chapter 4

Youth Ministry's Historical Context:
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Chapter 5

Reflections on Youth Ministry in a Global Context:
Taking Seriously the Least of These



The Tasks of Practical Theology

1

Chapter

Fessing Up: Owning Our Theological Commitments

Kenda Creasy Dean

To be a Christian at all is to be a theologian. There are no exceptions.¹

It was during my first year of ordained ministry, while I was in my late 20s, that I learned my younger sister had multiple sclerosis. Kathy's diagnosis was the first really awful news to confront me personally, and for months I reeled under the weight of the disease and the dreams it altered. MS is a cowardly disease; it maims but it does not kill. Today, I am profoundly grateful for that fact—but at the time, all I could feel was terror of the disease's cruelty. One day, on a visit back to my seminary campus, I dumped my anguish on my former seminary advisor. "But God made your sister," Robin insisted. "God made her body..."

"Yeah," I shot back, "but when God made her, it all *worked*." And then I dissolved into a pile of sobs, right there in the middle of her office.

Robin's idea of pastoral care wasn't what they teach you in counseling class. She didn't reach for the Kleenex, do reflective listening, or give me "space." Instead, she leaned forward, looked at me straight through those hot tears, and said: "*Do* you believe in God? Because you live *as if there is no God*."

And I cringed—because it was true.

Leaky theology

I hadn't meant to live that way, of course. After all, I was an ordained pastor, a shepherd of souls, convinced of my call and knee-deep in leading young people to Christ. When Robin shone the halogen beams of God's love onto the way I lived my life, the God-light in my eyes was so bright that everything else receded into deep space. For an instant things looked the way they look from onstage in the theater: the spotlight freezes you in time, so bright that you can't see the audience, forcing you to exist in the *now* onstage. The light in Robin's office stung my unadjusted eyes. I couldn't see through it, or around it, or beyond it. There was only light, and Jesus, and *now*.

We call them *moments of truth* for a reason. We see things differently after the light of Christ exposes us, reveals what we truly believe—even those of us vowed to ministry. It took Saul three days to see straight after the light of Christ knocked him off his high horse; personally, I'm still working on it. Until Robin challenged me to "fess up," I hadn't realized what a practical atheist I had become. I was...I *am*...a sincere coward who confesses Christ and then runs for cover. I live like a theological schizophrenic. There is the theology I want to believe, that I think I believe, that I tell youth I

1. Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How to Think Theologically* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 2.

believe, that I entered ministry *because* I believe—and then there is the theology I actually practice. The first theology is risky, radical, self-abandoning. But the second one—the theology that leaks through my life and ministry, and as a result has devastating potential to drain my actions of authenticity and power—is cautious, calculated, credible.

Christianity isn't any of those things.

A moment of truth for youth ministry

The word of the Lord came to me, saying,

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."

"Ah, Sovereign Lord," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child!"

But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you.

Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord.

—Jeremiah 1:4-8

The tragic spring of 1999 shattered our national complacency about "youth these days" and ended a century of youth ministry more often devoted to keeping young people safe and entertained than to challenging them with mature faith. After the Columbine High School massacre, stories of teen martyrs flooded the media and gripped our hearts. As youth ministers tried to regain their pastoral balance in the days and months that followed, I heard from Christian youth leaders all over the country who were haunted by the same question. It was a question asked pointedly by teens in chat rooms and churches, by parents and pastors in pews and in pulpits, by young people who have had it up to *here* with pizza and volleyball, and who are dying—literally—for something worth dying for. "Would *you* die for your faith?" they asked us. About the best most of us could manage was, "Gosh...I hope so."

The shocking congruency between the faith professed by Columbine students of many Christian traditions, and the way they lived that faith in word and deed during the shootings, stopped us dead in our tracks. Teenagers who couldn't keep a promise to clean their rooms remained faithful to Christ at gunpoint. We saw the cost of this radical discipleship in the lives it ended as well as in the lives it saved. Meanwhile—while teenagers were stockpiling explosives in a garage, posting threats on the Web and recording their deadly plans on video—Congress debated the definition of sex and school boards wondered if squirt guns merited expulsion and church leaders got themselves tied up in knots over the color of the youth room—for perhaps the millionth time this century.

Just what were we thinking?

Christians preach a God who is (thankfully) bigger than we are, and as a result our lives and our ministries always fall miserably short. This is human and inevitable; but it is also redeemable. Unless those of us in youth ministry learn to approach our calling as a *theological* enterprise, asking ourselves why we pastor youth in the ways that we do, we risk turning youth ministry into a giant *Saturday Night Live* skit:

What we say: "God sent Jesus to save the world!"

What we think: "I must save this young person from self-destructing."

What we say: "God is in control!"

What we think: "They can't run this program without me."

What we say: "Jesus loves us unconditionally."

What we think: "I can't tell them what I think or they won't like me."

What we say: “With God, nothing is impossible.”

What we think: “I feel like I’m drowning in youth ministry.”

Add to your glossary

- *Theology:* human reflection on who God is and how God works in the world
- *Historical theology:* reflection on the historic texts of Christian faith, such as the Bible, doctrinal documents, creeds, and confessions.
- *Systematic theology:* reflection on general themes found throughout Christian tradition, especially church teachings (doctrines).
- *Practical theology:* reflection about how God works in Christian action, in order to set forth norms and strategies for practices that faithfully participate in God’s transformation to transform the church and the world.

Theology: it’s everywhere you are

Theology is rampant among teenagers. Perhaps that statement surprises you. We have grown accustomed to thinking of theology as academic gobbledygook, alien to adolescents and the (real) people who work with them. Think again. A few minutes of television ought to convince you: Postmodern society pelts young people with gods from every side—gods of good times, gods of good looks, gods of success, gods of excess, gods of health, gods of wealth, gods of ambition, gods of position, and countless others—all claiming salvation or your money back. Because there is no shortage of truths vying for the adolescent soul, there is no shortage of theological discussion among teenagers who must daily choose between them.² Theological images permeate music and movies, theological rituals find their way into gangs and families, theological assumptions work their way into the way teenagers approach proms and parents, homework and careers. *Adolescents traffic in theology every single day.* Of course, this theology may not be Christian. Chances are good that it’s not even conscious. But theology infuses the air young people breathe, punctuating the practices of families, hovering in the hallways of the high school, and reverberating in the rhythms of the neighborhood.

Adolescents, therefore, take their theology quite seriously, even though they’re not conscious of it. Most of their theological reflection goes unheard, unnamed, and unclaimed. They are unaware that the social studies discussion on freedom is a theological discussion. They don’t realize that the way they treat an unpopular classmate reflects a doctrine of creation. They don’t suspect that their impulse to sacrifice on behalf of others is an act of faith. They may treat their CDs as sacred artifacts, vaguely aware that music transports them to a mysterious “higher ground.” But they often deny that music has the power to influence them—although if you try to change the radio station, you will encounter a resistance so fierce that it can only be compared to parishioners’ reaction the last time you tried to update the music in church.

Most adolescents engage in *intuitive theology*—reflection about the divine-human relationship that often bypasses language and rational discourse, but that nonetheless constitutes a real part of a young person’s inner life. Intuitive theology might be composed of beliefs or actions that “feel” right to a teenager, but they lack a conscious

Genius and intuitive theology

“The most beautiful and deepest experience a [human] can have is a sense of the mysterious. It is the underlying principle of religion as well as of all serious endeavour in art and in science...He who has never had this experience seems to me, if not dead, then at least blind. The sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is a something that our mind cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and as feeble reflexion, this is religiousness. In this sense I am religious. To me it suffices to wonder at these secrets and to attempt humbly to grasp with my mind a mere image of the lofty structure in all that there is.”

—Albert Einstein, “My Credo,”
cited by William J. O’Malley,
Daily Prayers for Busy People
(Winona, Minnesota:
Saint Mary’s Press, 1990), 77.

2. This search is part of the adolescent need to establish a worldview, or personal ideology, which is an important task during adolescence. Cf. Erik H. Erikson, *Youth, Identity and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968); Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982); David Elkind, *All Grown Up and No Place to Go* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1984); James E. Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998). A discussion of the quest for truth among postmodern adolescents is specifically discussed in K.C. Dean, “X-Files and Unknown Gods: The Adolescent Search for Truth,” *American Baptist Quarterly* (Spring 2000), in press.

Ponderable

Do you know anyone who experienced a crisis of faith during college? What challenged her or his faith? Can you explain that person's reaction developmentally?

Anselm (1033-1109) was a well-known philosopher/theologian famous for his ontological argument for the existence of God.

"If you are a theologian, pray truly; and if you pray truly, you are a theologian."

—Evagrius of Pontus,
cited by Kathleen Norris,
*Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary
of Faith* (New York:
Riverhead, 1998), 359.

structure or story that holds them together.

If the teenager has been involved in a religious community, she might have an *embedded theology*. Embedded theology comes from a religious story inherited from a faith community. The images and language from this story *ring true* for the adolescent, but she has not critically examined them.³ Intuitive and embedded theologies are extremely vulnerable to manipulation, and they don't hold up well to scrutiny—which partly explains the crisis of faith awaiting many a devout Christian high school student who takes an embedded theology to college, only to find that critical thinking is the order of the day.⁴

The alternative to intuitive or embedded theology is *deliberate theology*—an understanding of faith that arises when a young person carefully examines his theological assumptions and practices. Deliberate theology is not simply a rational exercise in critical thinking (which would reduce theology to a cognitive operation). Above all, deliberate theology is *faith*—but it is faith seeking understanding. To use Anselm's description, it is faith that tries to figure out God, faith that can ask "why" with confidence knowing that God is not threatened by our doubt. Students with embedded theologies say, "I believe..." Students with deliberate theologies say, "I believe *because*..." Whenever a young person asks why, he edges toward deliberate faith. The "why" questions always lead us to God, even when that God is unknown.

The theological nature of adolescence

Ponderable

Ninety-five percent of American teenagers say they believe in God, and half say they attend church weekly—68 percent "because they want to." Think about the young people you know. Do these statistics ring true with your experience of ministry?

1. George H. Gallup, Jr., *The Spiritual Life of Young Americans: Approaching the Year 2000* (Princeton, NJ: George H. Gallup International Institute, 1999), 3, 10.

Deliberate theological reflection lays a stable, though flexible, foundation for growing faith. Unfortunately, youth ministry has been reluctant to invite young people into this level of theological thinking. We tend to view young people as *consumers* of theology rather than as people who help *construct* religious discourse. We are far more likely to consider youth *objects* of ministry rather than *agents* of ministry; people to be ministered *unto* rather than people Jesus has called into ministry in their own right. We think teenagers need theology added to them, like antifreeze, when they really require a language that claims for Christ the unnamed quest for God that is already well underway.

The irony, of course, is that adolescents are theologians by nature, uniquely wired for theological reflection because questions about who we are in relationship to "the gods" form the spine of the human search for self. Children cannot ask theological questions because they have not yet developed the cognitive capacity for *third person perspective-taking*, or the ability to see the world through someone else's eyes. Adolescents, however, begin to develop the ability to see themselves and the world from the perspective of another—an extraordinary mental achievement that literally changes the way youth experience themselves in the world. "We do our young people a great disservice when we speak of this new power as critical thought," notes educator Sharon

3. See Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How to Think Theologically* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 13-16. I have borrowed the term "embedded theology" from Stone and Duke, who prefer the term "deliberative" to "deliberate theology," which rightly preserves the rhetorical nature of this form of theological discourse.

4. The other reason for questioning faith during the college years is developmental and has to do with the fact that late adolescents have developed cognitive skills that allow them to step back and evaluate their situation from another perspective. In other words, most adolescents are most likely to be cognitively capable of a faith crisis during late adolescence.

"Believing in God is not the issue [for teenagers]; believing God matters is the issue."

—Kenda Creasy Dean and
Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life:
The Art of Soul-Tending for Youth
Ministry* (Nashville:
Upper Room, 1998), 15.

The roots of practical theology

Practical theology is rooted in the form of knowledge Aristotle called *phronesis*. *Phronesis*, or *practical wisdom*, is the ability to make judgments appropriate for particular, concrete situations, the kind of knowledge necessary in law or medicine. The ancient Greeks valued this kind of knowledge for the highest of Greek vocations—political leadership. They believed practical wisdom could be developed through education and through participation in praxis (see page 32).

Aristotle distinguished *phronesis* from two other kinds of knowledge: *theoria* (where we get the word "theory"), which referred to knowledge born of detached, philosophical reflection and analysis, and *poiesis*, the kind of knowledge that comes from creative technical skill.¹ If philosophy is the child of *theoria*, art is the offspring of *poiesis*.

Do you view theology as *phronesis*, *theoria*, or *poiesis*? To what aspects of Christian life does each branch of knowledge contribute? Is one form of knowledge more important than others for faith formation?

1. For a concise summary of these concepts, see James Fowler, "The Emerging New Shape of Practical Theology," *Practical Theology—International Perspectives* (Frankfurt and Main: Peter Lang, 1999), 78–80.

Daloz Parks, describing the importance of third person perspective-taking for spiritual development:

New questions can now be asked, and they can sound critical; however, the essence of this emerging power in adolescent lives is the capacity for reflection and for wondering in new ways about the relationship between the self and world. This new power is vital in the development of both the moral and the spiritual life. It allows the individual to take into account the perspective of the other—even many others. It enables the individual to come closer to participating in the perspective of God. It represents an enlargement of consciousness and an enhanced capacity for wonder.⁵

In short, third-person perspective-taking equips the adolescent with a sense of *interiority* that is altogether new—a recognition that the emerging self is composed of inward as well as external qualities. This interiority gives the adolescent "more space for becoming," as Parks puts it. It gives young people room to entertain transcendence—to consider possibilities that pull youth beyond themselves, into a larger reality that includes but is not limited to them. They begin to recognize the possibility of another point of view besides their own—including God's. They "try on" God-mode, imagining what it might be like to participate in the perspective of God. They wonder: about God, about themselves, about their purpose and place in the cosmos. Children inquire *about* God; youth inquire *after* God, seeking a relationship, a sacred trust, an anchor that remains steady in winds of change.

Practical theology: theological reflection on Christian action

Youth ministry practices a particular kind of deliberate theology called *practical theology*, or theological reflection on Christian action. There is no sharp line between practical theology and theology in general; as British practical theologian Paul Ballard points out, "All theology is in the service of the community of faith, and therefore all theology is essentially practical."⁶ Don Browning, the most well-known American practical theologian, describes all theology as "fundamentally practical," with historical and systematic theology informing the larger practical theological enterprise.⁷

Practical theology is the kind of theological reflection that takes place when we're up to our necks in the particularities of Christian life and ministry. Unlike historical or systematic theology, which seek to discover God's truth by stepping back from Christian life and analyzing the texts, traditions, and general themes of Christianity, practical theology discovers God's *truth in and through* Christian life. Historical and sys-

5. Sharon Daloz Parks, "Faithful Becoming in a Complex World: New Powers, Perils, and Possibilities," *Growing Up Post-modern: Imitating Christ in the Age of "Whatever,"* The 1998 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture (Princeton, New Jersey: Institute of Youth Ministry, Princeton Theological Seminary), 42.

6. Paul Ballard, "Practical Theology as the Theology of Practice," *Practical Theology—International Perspectives* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), 142.

7. See Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress), 1991.

Praxis or practice?

Praxis is a pattern of activity in which action and ongoing reflection interpenetrate.¹ Academic internships are examples of praxis, because they involve learning through action and intentional reflection on that action simultaneously.

Practices are shared patterns of interaction in a community that have evolved to meet people's needs and serve their recurring interests in that community.² Practices both identify us as, and shape us into, people who belong to a particular community. Saying the Pledge of Allegiance, celebrating July 4th and voting are ways we practice being American. Abstaining from the use of electricity, wearing simple dress, using straight pins as fasteners after baptism are ways Amish Mennonites practice what it means to be Amish. Prayer, stewardship, hospitality and care, and worship are just a few of the practices of the Christian community, ways we practice our faith.

Should youth ministry be more concerned with praxis or practices? Are they truly distinct, or is praxis simply good practice?

1. Cf. Richard J. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 1971.

2. For a concise summary of these concepts, see James Fowler, "The Emerging Shape of Practical Theology," *Practical Theology—International Perspectives* (Frankfurt and Main: Peter Lang, 1999), 78–80.

tematic theology give youth ministry a broader context—a wider conversation in which the particular situation of practical theology may participate.

But practical theology is more than a matter of applying historical and systematic theology, like so much spray paint, to the surface of Christian life. Practical theology has creative force: It weaves together multiple strands of theological reflection to evoke new understandings of God in particular—concrete situations that call for action. As a result, practical theology's unique objective is reconceiving the ways we actually practice faith—reconstructing our strategies for communicating the gospel—so that they become more useful to God in the divine transformation of the world.

Put simply, practical theology is reflection about how God works in Christian action to transform people in order to set forth strategies for Christian practice that faithfully participate in that transformation. Practical theology works a little like plumbing: it connects what we confess and what we do as Christians, in order to create a clean flow—a radical congruency—between the source of Living Water and the spigot from which it flows. To that end, practical theology constantly evaluates Christian action in order to find ways to practice our faith more transparently—ways that will better communicate the gospel.

Theology from the middle of the pool

When our son was four, I decided to sign him up for swimming lessons (bad idea). We went faithfully, but Brendan steadfastly refused to get in the pool. Every week the teacher would stand waist deep in water and hold her hands out for Brendan to come to her. Nothing doing. "You come *here*," he told her emphatically, patting the edge of the pool where he was sitting. In eight weeks of swimming lessons, Brendan got *wet* twice. Maybe he had a better understanding of the pool environment—slippery floors, smell of chlorine, swarms of half-clad children and over-eager parents—but he was no closer to swimming at the end of those lessons than at the beginning.

A lot of people confuse knowledge about the faith environment with faith itself. "I'm very spiritual, but I'm not religious," they will say. What they mean is that they appreciate faith from the side of the pool, but they're not about to get wet. Christians, on the other hand, *never* think about faith from the side of the pool. The practices of Christian community are so counterintuitive—tithing, simplicity, sacraments, prayer, worship, hospitality to the stranger, and so on—that we simply can never understand God's grace in them until we *do* them. Likewise, some aspects of Jesus' love are impossible to understand until we finally put down our nets and *follow* him.

Practical theology takes place in the middle of the pool. Practical theology includes reflection before and after plunging into Christian action, just as diving requires forethought to gauge the depth of the water, and afterthought to figure out how to improve the next dive. But practical theology's primary emphasis is on the dive itself, the normative practice of Christian life. Consequently, practical theologians are people who can discern and execute a faithful dive—action that communicates the gospel faithfully and appropriately for a concrete situation.

After all, this is the objective of youth ministry: to help young people grow

Why I make Sam go to church

"Sam is the only kid he knows who goes to church—who is made to go to church two or three times a month. He rarely wants to. This is not exactly true: the truth is he never wants to go. What young boy would rather be in church on the weekends than hanging out with a friend?"

"You might think, noting the bitterness, the resignation, that he was being made to sit through a six-hour Latin mass. Or you might wonder why I make this strapping, exuberant boy come with me most weeks, and if you were to ask, this is what I would say:

"I make him because I can.' I outweigh him by nearly 75 pounds.

"But that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want—which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy—are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith...They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful."

—Anne Lamott,

Traveling Mercies (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 99-100.

faith mature enough that they can use that faith—their assumptions about who God is and how God works in the world—to discern and execute faithful Christian action as disciples of Jesus Christ. If youth ministry is going to help adolescents become practical theologians, then we must begin by helping them *practice* faith, which requires *both* a relationship with Jesus Christ and opportunities for ministry *as teenagers*. Youth ministry that emphasizes evangelism, without simultaneously giving adolescents opportunities to serve in substantive ministry, eviscerates discipleship. Youth ministry that seeks Christian action without a growing relationship with Jesus reduces it to good works. Neither dimension can stand on its own as faith.

In short, if adolescents are to become practical theologians in their own right, we have to get them in the pool. And that means that you and I have to stand in the middle of the pool ourselves, practicing our faith while holding out our hands, inviting the youth we love to jump into the Christian community alongside us.

One more thing: Because this book is written for people studying for the professional ministry, many of our examples will be written from the perspective of youth leaders like you. But it is important that we not understand practical theology as something church professionals do. Jesus calls all Christians (youth included) into ministry; therefore, Jesus calls all Christians (youth included) to be practical theologians—people who try to better understand how God works in Christian action so that our practices may cooperate with God's work more fully.

God gives each of us a little flock to pastor: a congregation, a high school, a family, a group of friends who gather around a lunch table at school, the lady next door. But it would be arrogant to assume that Jesus' plans for the sheep stopped with their grateful conversion. Jesus wants the people in our flocks to become pastors of flocks as well. That means that our "flock folk" need to become aware of the theological convictions governing their lives, too (even if they aren't Christians),⁸ and to be challenged to evaluate and reconstruct their practices to serve God more faithfully, freely, and fully.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch...**Add to your glossary**

- *Pastor* (from Latin *pastor*, herds man; from *pascere*, to feed): someone who feeds a flock.

Anne Jenkins is the solo pastor of a small, rural Presbyterian congregation in Montana.⁹ A year into Anne's pastorate, the congregation received a windfall gift of more than a million dollars, specifically earmarked for youth programs. As a veteran youth minister, Anne was both delighted and cautious. She had spent a year trying to redirect the church's entertainment-oriented youth program toward a model of spiritual formation. The "youth program" gift was put in a temporary account until a planning committee could be formed and a long-range vision developed for the money's use. As the pastor, Anne had sole access to the account.

Meanwhile, Anne took some youth from the church on their first mission project to Mexico. A student leadership team had drafted a covenant for the trip, outlining

8. Even not believing in God is a conviction about God.

9. Details have been changed.

expectations for participation. Since students who are underage in the United States can legally drink in Mexico, the student leadership team decided that, as American citizens, they should abide by U.S. law and abstain from drinking in Mexico. They included a clause to this effect in the trip covenant, which also stated that anyone failing to uphold the covenant would be sent home, along with an accompanying adult. Everyone going on the trip signed the covenant.

You guessed it: early in the trip, two girls slipped out one night and got drunk. Everyone knew that the consequence of drinking was a speedy trip home to Montana, but the girls shrugged off the incident, defending their right to drink rather than repenting of their violation of the group covenant. So, Anne called the airlines and found out that the tickets would cost over \$2,000, with Anne fronting the amount on her already over-burdened credit card. She phoned the girls' parents. One girl's parents refused to pick up their daughter at the airport if she came home. The other girl's mother, an active member of the youth council and a former leader of the youth program before Anne's arrival, was furious—at Anne. After planning the trip for a year, how could Anne even think of sending her daughter home? “What about forgiveness? What about a second chance? What about grace?” she demanded. Neither girls' parents said they would pay for the plane tickets.

Now, if you were Anne, what would you do? You might choose the course of action most likely to *work* (and working is a good and honorable thing), which would be basing your decision on a philosophical point of view called *pragmatism*. Since the girls' parents would not cooperate, and Anne couldn't afford \$2,000 on her credit card, and the girls were not a danger to themselves or to others, a pragmatic response might be to let them finish out the trip. True, the covenant would no longer stand for anything—but just how pragmatic are covenants, anyway? Covenants are signed and broken every day. As a means of enforcing behavior, they don't really *work*.

Or you could base your decision on interpersonal harmony, choosing the course of action that would maintain relationships and create the least friction. There's certainly nothing wrong with interpersonal harmony. Anne liked being liked. She didn't want to irritate parents or parishioners, or the girls for that matter. She didn't want dissent to ruin the trip for the rest of the students. The mission project was an important part of the new direction for youth ministry she hoped to instill; if the youth could just see it through, they would know what it's like to be changed by serving others in Christ's name. True, Anne would have to swallow her anger at the girls and their parents, and maybe even deny her anger toward herself for being “played” by the girls. But maybe swallowing her own feelings would be a small price to pay for harmony on the rest of the trip.

Or perhaps you would base your position on safety by choosing the course of action that entails the least risk. Safety is critically important in youth ministry. Physical risk was not an issue in Anne's case; the girls would fly home, chaperoned. But what about the girl whose parents refused to meet her at the airport? What if the church would not reimburse Anne's credit card? What if the congregation sided with the girls' parents about Anne's decision—and in a small community with two influential parents lobbying against her, that seemed fairly likely—and began to question her judgment as

their pastor? Would sending the girls home jeopardize the progress Anne had made in redirecting the youth program? All of these risks factor into a decision based on safety.

Fessing up

The praxis-theory-praxis loop

Many practical theologians consider the “praxis-theory-praxis loop” one of the features that distinguishes practical theology from other forms of theological reflection. Put simply, practical theology begins in praxis (what we *do* as Christians), moves to theory (*reflection* about what we do as Christians), and moves back to praxis (more faithful ways of doing what we do as Christians). And so the cycle continues.

Is practical theology unique in this regard? Or do you think all theology is fundamentally practical?

Anne decided to let the girls stay on the trip, mostly for pragmatic reasons—but six months later when she told me about the incident, Anne was still ruing her decision. It wasn’t the choice she wanted to make, and she had spent months reflecting on why. Practical theological reflection usually works this way. Something catches us off guard, brings us up short, jolts us into searching for a new set of tools to address a situation. It didn’t occur to Anne until afterward that she might have used some of the earmarked money to reimburse the cost of the plane tickets or that the parents involved had opposed her at other times when her actions differed from their former pastor’s.

But what bothered Anne most was the realization that the decision had compromised some of her core theological commitments with the youth themselves. Inadvertently, Anne had undermined the very parts of the gospel story she had spent a year trying to convey to these young people. She wanted to teach about costly grace, about redemption from sin won by a price, so she had arranged a mission project that required financial sacrifice, sweat equity, a time commitment. The girls’ unrepentant attitude (and that of their parents) mutated forgiveness into *cheap grace*, a facile compromise rather than an act of discipleship. As a Presbyterian, Anne especially prized the doctrine of *covenant*, representing God’s unbroken promise to creation, fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In letting the girls stay, Anne had destroyed the credibility of the written covenant, and violated an unspoken covenant of trust with the student leadership team, who had risked advocating an unpopular position on drinking with their peers.

When faced with a concrete situation of ministry like Anne’s, theological convictions do not normally jump out and advertise themselves. This part of practical theological reflection must be done in advance. Anne’s dilemma with the girls on the Mexico trip would have been less agonizing if she had been able to approach her decision with a method of practical theological reflection in mind. This is the reason for a book like this on youth ministry: you need time and space to tease out the underlying theological convictions that are normative for your life and ministry (see “What are your theological rocks?” on page 15), both so you can intentionally construct your ministry around these convictions, and so you can evaluate practices of ministry in light of these convictions as particular situations call for Christian action in the future.

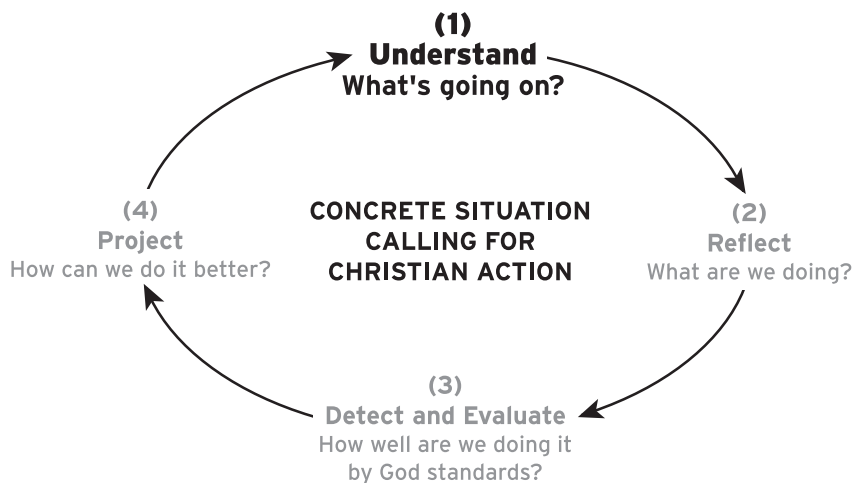
Furthermore, our theological priorities have as much to do with who we are, as with who Jesus is. You might view Anne’s situation in Mexico through the lens of God’s *forgiveness* and *grace*, while someone else will look at it in terms of God’s *justice* and *redemption*. Not to worry; it doesn’t matter from which side of the pool we jump into practical theological reflection—we still get wet. The point is that practical theological reflection leads to a *radical congruency* between the theology we espouse and the one we live. Take a look at your own faith journey, your faith tradition, your family’s

religious practices, the communities in your life that have partly defined you. Do they explain in any way the theological commitments you choose to emphasize? What do they say about your own relationship with Jesus Christ?

The four tasks of practical theological reflection

Practical theological reflection is a process—a spiral more than a cycle. In this spiral we move closer to the perspective of God as we reflect on norms and strategies for Christian action. This cycle of theological reflection lays the foundation for practices of faith that cooperate with God's transformation of the church and the world—a plan of salvation in which every young person, in his or her particular place and time, plays an irreplaceable part.

Practical theology differs from other forms of theological reflection in that it focuses on knowing God through concrete situations. Instead of developing pastoral theories from biblical texts, historic confessions, or church doctrine, practical theology is informed by—but goes beyond—all of this. Ultimately our practical theology for youth ministry grows out of the accumulated wisdom of hundreds of pastoral situations—not all of them our own—that eventually add up to a theory: "These are the normative ways in which I expect to practice faith with young people so they will encounter the good news of Jesus Christ in this particular ministry, in this particular time and place, that God has laid before me."



The Tasks of Practical Theology

God-talk

"When God-talk is speech that is not of this world, it is a false language. In a religion that celebrates the Incarnation—the joining together of the human and the divine—a spiritualized jargon that does not ground itself in the five senses should be anathema. But the human tendency to disincarnate language is a strong one. I used to wonder if Jesus Christ, with all of the earthy metaphors he customarily employed, would marvel at the letters my beloved grandmother Norris would send me when I was in college. Ordinary family news would fill a page or so, but then she'd turn to faith, and her language would ascend to a realm in which the words were full of ether. It seemed as if my grandmother's considerable ego had been subsumed, imperfectly, into 'Jesus' this and 'Jesus' that. The heavyweight theological words were a code I could not crack; evidently they spoke only to the saved.

"In seeking my own faith, I've had to contend mightily with the language of Christianity. I've learned that if these words are to remain viable, I must find ways to incarnate them, so as to make them accessible to believer and non-believer alike... I don't mean that pastors shouldn't speak of God, or Christ, or salvation—they'd be foolish not to. But when a sermon is little but biblical or theological language that the preacher has not troubled to digest, to incarnate, as it were, so that it might readily translate into the lives of parishioners, it is often worse than no sermon at all... God-talk is a form of idolatry, a way of making God small and manageable."

—Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead, 1998), 211-213.

The first task of practical theology: understand

The first section of this book focuses on the first task in practical theological reflection: *understanding the concrete situation in which we must act*. In youth ministry this means action on behalf of God's love for young people. Because God calls us to act as Christians, and not just as "good moral people," we must identify theological assumptions—and not only philosophical, developmental, sociological, or educational ones—that influence the way we practice faith. And we must bring these assumptions into conversation with the concrete situation at hand (see diagram, page 32).

For example, Anne's decision to let the girls remain on the mission project was ultimately based on philosophical, developmental, sociological reasons, and perhaps professional reasons, not theological ones. To fully understand a concrete situation calling for Christian action, youth ministry *must* take these factors into account—but we cannot stop here. Philosophically, Anne's decision "worked" in that it kept the group functioning as a whole (pragmatism). Developmentally, her decision protected young girls from risky behavior around alcohol. Sociologically, Anne's decision was consistent with the congregational culture in which she served. Professionally, it spared Anne questions about her pastoral judgment. However, without understanding the *theological* dimension of the situation, in the end human interests—and not necessarily God's interests—were ultimately served.

Historical and systematic theology are helpful in unpacking a situation theologically, and our faith traditions inevitably equip us with certain doctrinal "bookmarks"—theological assumptions that we draw on again and again. As a United Methodist, for instance, I am likely to view youth ministry through the lenses of grace, incarnation, salvation—themes emphasized by United Methodist preaching, worship, and hymnody. At the Presbyterian seminary where I teach, words like *covenant*, *vocation*, and *transformation* are all the rage—but they would rather leave the term *salvation* to the Baptists!

Even those of us without denominational affiliations can locate ourselves in streams of Christian tradition without digging too far. And as a result of our location, we practice ministry in certain ways. I've been tilting youth ministry toward sanctifying grace and holiness for years without a second thought—and I did this long before I knew words like *sanctification* and *holiness*. Every theological *thought* has been thought before. Historical and systematic theology give these streams of thought names to provide a shorthand for the church's internal discussions about who we are and what we believe.

But you can explain your theological priorities just as well—and sometimes better, where youth are concerned—without relying on a graduate course in systematic theology. Practical theology begins and ends in practice, so if you want to discover the theological assumptions you hold dear, start by examining the way you practice your faith. Go ahead—try it:

Make a list of the things you do *because you are Christian*. Include both the

Things I do because I am Christian:

-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-

What themes, patterns, or relationships do I notice in these actions?
What do these themes, patterns, or relationships suggest about what I believe about God?

"Anyone is a disguise for God."

—Albert Einstein, cited William J. O'Malley, *Daily Prayers for Busy People* (Winona, Minnesota: Saint Mary's Press, 1990), 77

kinds of things you do with young people in ministry and your personal practices of faith. Pay special attention to the things you do for God—and the ways that you do them—that bring you the most joy. Also look for those aspects of youth ministry that matter most to you—that you can't imagine ministry without.

Now look for themes and patterns that emerge from your list. For example, maybe you find yourself drawn to any action that tries to preserve the sanctity of life: you work hard so youth will respect the earth, or you protest abortion, or you introduce young people to human rights violations in Sudan, or you invest in health ministries that help teenagers take care of their bodies. What you're telling young people in these actions is that God's love for them can be discovered in the way God has made them, which is one aspect of what the church calls a doctrine of creation.

Or maybe you love the practices of contemplative spirituality. Above all, you want youth to learn to pray, and you yourself seek opportunities for confession, thanksgiving, petition, intercession, and praise. You're big on retreats, you light candles during youth meetings, and you use music behind every activity to create a *mood* that will encourage youth to focus on God. These actions tell young people that God is a mystery, holy, and awesome but approachable through the mediating structures of worship. Such actions underscore the fact that God's love for adolescents is too great to be contained by words, and is best grasped existentially in the contemplative practices of prayer and worship.

Or maybe when you look at your Christian journey, all you can see are relationships. Your most significant God-encounters have come through important Christian friends, and you find yourself doing back flips to help young people and the adult leaders establish significant Christian friendships with each other. You emphasize summer work projects, camps, and bike trips so kids will have an excuse to deepen their relationships. When you look at your calendar for ministry, it is peppered by lunch appointments, soccer practice, choir concerts (at five different high schools), and a dozen different small groups. What your actions are telling young people (besides the fact that you're probably way overscheduled) is that there is something holy about a relationship: Jesus is present wherever two or three gather in his name—God meets us through human beings. Historically, the church has called this belief the doctrine of the Incarnation—God's decision to walk among us in the human form of Jesus Christ.

The first question of practical theologians, then, is: *What's going on here? How do I understand this concrete situation in which I must act on behalf of God's love for young people?* Asking *what's going on* means listening to clues from the social sciences, too: Psychologically, what is this young person's struggle? Sociologically, what cultural factors are at work here? Educationally, what can be learned from this situation? Practical theology is always an interdisciplinary enterprise, simply because no concrete situation is one-dimensional. At the same time, practical theological reflection must raise our theological assumptions to the surface to shed God's light on wisdom from other disciplines and initiate a conversation that can lead to radical congruency between what we confess and who we are as Christians.

The other tasks of practical theology: reflect, detect and evaluate, and project

The other tasks of practical theology constitute the second, third, and fourth sections of this book. I'll be back to introduce those sections and to give you some handles for the discussion that follows.

For now, let the pages here help you better understand the concrete situation into which you have been called to ministry. God has called you, not just to any time or place, but to this time and place—"for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14)—on behalf of God's love for young people. God has deemed your ministry in this particular place and time necessary in God's transformation of the church and the world.

As you try to understand this situation, you have many disciplines that will guide you. Take into account the developmental changes that influence your understanding of this situation (Chapter 2, Chap Clark); sociological and anthropological factors that make a difference (Chapter 3, Don Richter); historical trajectories leading up to the ministry you will begin or inherit (Chapter 4, Mark Cannister); and the impact of contemporary social trends like globalization and urbanization (Chapter 5, Tony Campolo).

But don't forget to take your theological rocks with you, for they will color how you read the words that lie ahead, not to mention the way you do ministry in the weeks, months, and years that follow. You might exchange rocks as you read further, or discover that a rock that seems small when you reach down to pick it up actually reaches deep into your theological soil. Don't despair if it takes more digging than you bargained for to unearth your practical theological assumptions. Faith most easily takes root in soil where the rocks have been dug out. You may feel overwhelmed by the complexity of the concrete situations into which you have been called; maybe the particularity of practical theology makes you dizzy, and you yearn for the simplicity of one good all-encompassing theory. You may even wonder if it's possible to actually practice the theology you believe. After all, radical congruency is for martyrs, not ministers.

Or is it?